

Projects serve needs of Delta ecosystem

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The headlines are as old as 1991, and as new as today:

- Water allotments cut in order to protect endangered fish in California's Delta.
- Kern County farmers worry about how they will irrigate their fields.
- Silicon Valley businesses worry about water for their manufacturing processes.

It may seem like déjà vu, but it isn't.

The water crisis in the late 1980s and early '90s was caused by a drought combined with regulatory actions to protect winter-run Chinook salmon as endangered. The potential consequences to both the economy and the environment were dire and led to the creation of a joint state and federal program known as CALFED to deal with the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta's water supply and ecological crises.

Now, 12 years since CALFED's formation and seven years into a 30-year plan for the Delta, some are asking, "What's changed?" The answer is both "a lot" and "not nearly enough."

Since the 25 state and federal CALFED agencies agreed to a plan of action called the Record of Decision in 2000, they have funded nearly \$5 billion in research and project improvements throughout California – upstream and downstream of the Delta and in the Delta itself. While this funding has enabled us to learn much more about the Delta than we knew in the early 1990s, it has provided us with a sobering look at how much more we need to know and – more importantly – accomplish.

To the good, almost 1 million acre-feet of water has been added to the state's water supply through CALFED-funded groundwater storage and water recycling projects – enough water for nearly 2 million families each year.

Ecological improvements and fish screens upstream of the Delta have contributed to improved Sacramento River salmon runs; investments in science have led us to rethink how the Delta's ecosystem really works.

On the other hand, the numbers of Delta smelt and other pelagic "open water" fish are at all-time lows, and the number of lawsuits filed over Delta issues is approaching an all-time high.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger quickly recognized that California's Delta was vulnerable to collapse and that its problems were a critical priority. He moved forward with a course correction and refining of CALFED's mission through a 10-Year action plan in 2006, then followed with establishment of Delta Vision, an initiative to find long-term sustainability for the Delta. He also supported the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan to offer added protection to many Delta species. He also champions a second strategic growth plan that would provide \$2.5 billion in immediate and long-term repairs and restoration in the Delta, as well as funding for needed water storage and environmental stewardship programs.

Building on what CALFED has learned in the past seven years, these initiatives will propel us in our efforts to better understand and manage the Delta's ecology and provide more reliability to California's water needs.

The Delta is a difficult system to manage. Any problem can be the result of numerous complex interactions that must be sorted through, guided by science. Today's most complex issue is understanding the dynamics of the decline of Delta smelt – the little fish that has caused a big problem. Pumping water from the Delta is a factor but so, too, are urban and/or agricultural runoff and the impacts of undesirable, invasive species on the Delta smelt's food supply.

That said, the state and federal CALFED agencies will continue to fund good science and projects that help the Delta serve both the needs of the ecosystem and the state's water supply. In the meantime, we will continue to increase our understanding of the Delta with the hope that someday headlines such as those from 1991 and 2007 will conjure up thoughts not of déjà vu, but rather of problems resolved.